

2004 Fall Outlook

Wildlife populations in North Dakota depend on two things – Mother Nature and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

That's mostly an accurate statement, but not necessarily an original one. Previous North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief Ron Stromstad wrote those words a decade ago, and not much has changed.

Stromstad was correct in his assessment that the USDA and its farm programs have almost as much influence as the weather and other acts of nature on wildlife populations in our state. This theory has been validated several times in the past, first with the Soil Bank program of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the Conservation Reserve Program, launched in 1985.

The first large CRP enrollments, in terms of acreage, were in the late 1980s. Since then, many more acres were enrolled in a program initially designed to improve water quality and reduce soil erosion, but later expanded to include wildlife as a primary purpose. Today, North Dakota has nearly 3.4 million acres of additional quality habitat because of the Conservation Reserve Program.

It's important to emphasize that CRP is the primary reason we have experienced nearly 20 years of expanding and improving wildlife populations and hunting opportunities. Ground-nesting birds such as pheasants and many duck species are the most obvious benefactors. Big game such as deer and moose have also experienced population increases because of this additional habitat. Even furbearers such as muskrat and mink have profited from wetland restoration practices included in CRP.

While we have had bad winters – think 1996-97 – that hurt many species, it was nesting and escape cover provided by CRP that helped depressed populations rebound quickly.

An unprecedented wet cycle, over the last decade or so, has contributed to recovery of waterfowl populations. However, without excellent CRP nesting cover available at the time, the recovery may have been far less dramatic. Weather will always be a factor when it comes to wildlife surviving on the prairie, but having a reliable habitat foundation can certainly buffer the influence of severe weather.

In September 1994, Stromstad wrote his last article for this magazine and in it he said: "The most important short-term issue facing North Dakota wildlife enthusiasts today is the reauthorization and extension of the CRP."

It's ironic that almost 10 years to the day we need to say the same thing again. The only difference is that this time the goal of preserving CRP at its current level is going to be even more difficult. Here's why:

The first reason has to do with changes in the way USDA administers the program. In recent years, North Dakota landowners have had serious problems getting their land accepted or even reenrolled into CRP. Changes in how USDA ranks and rates offered acres have resulted in dramatically lower acceptance rates, and a shifting of CRP acres to other portions of the country where land rental rates are much higher and wildlife production benefits are arguably less beneficial, especially for migratory waterfowl.

The results of the latest CRP sign-up are a good example. In 2003, nearly 3,000 North Dakota landowners wanted to enroll acres into the program, but fewer than 300 were accepted. To break it down even more, in the 26th sign-up less than 3 percent of the acres offered in Hettinger County were accepted. Remember, prior to CRP pheasants were far less common in Hettinger County. Since the program's arrival, however, Hettinger County has been at or near the top in counties with

A Good Season Ahead, but Dark Clouds on the Horizon

By Randy Kreil

the highest pheasant harvest. If CRP disappears from the landscape in Hettinger County, the number of pheasants and pheasant hunters who have been visiting the area will also vanish.

If the current low acceptance rates prevail in years to come, we will reach a crossroads in 2007. In that year alone, contracts on 1.7 million acres of CRP in North Dakota will expire. In that one year we could lose more than half the CRP in the state. In the few years following 2007, even more contracts will expire, adding to the acres no longer providing soil, water and wildlife benefits. If the worst case happens, this will be devastating for wildlife populations and people who like to hunt.

Any loss of CRP will affect hunters because of reduced wildlife populations. But that's not all. More than 250,000 acres enrolled in the Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen hunting access program is related to CRP land. If CRP land is reduced, the number of PLOTS acres associated with CRP will fall as well.

The second reason that preservation of CRP will be more difficult is a sense of complacency on the part of many people, who either have land enrolled in CRP or have experienced hunting opportunities CRP acres offer. Many hunters and landowners are simply assuming CRP will remain an option under the next Farm Bill and will continue to be a significant component of the state's landscape.

The last time CRP was considered for reauthorization, the benefits were fresh in people's minds. They remembered the stable income that CRP payments provided, and how statewide pheasant harvests prior to 1985 were typically less than 100,000 birds, compared to an annual average of nearly 300,000 roosters taken in the early 1990s. At that time,

a coalition of agricultural and wildlife groups rallied to make sure CRP remained part of the picture on the Northern Plains.

Since reauthorization in 1996, we have all become content. Frankly, many hunters don't remember how difficult it was to fill a two-bird pheasant bag prior to CRP. Whether people rise to the challenge this time around remains to be seen. In today's hectic world, it's hard to think about things that may happen in three years, but that is exactly what needs to happen now if we are to preserve CRP and the benefits it provides North Dakota.

Getting people to realize that storm clouds are indeed on the horizon is not an easy task, considering hunting this fall should be outstanding again. The days of 75 percent fewer pheasants in the bag, a 39-day duck season with a three-bird limit, and only one deer license to fill, will be the furthest thing from their minds.

In this article, we provide predictions on what to expect this fall. In short, it will be a good year. We will also try to offer some insight into what things may be like in 2008 and beyond if CRP is no longer a significant fixture in North Dakota.

The coming years will indeed be like a prairie thunderstorm. The day is bright and warm. The sun is shining. And the wind is light. Things are like they're supposed to be – until you notice the slight wind shift to the east and you glance over your shoulder to the southwest and spy in the distance an approaching line of dark clouds filled with nature's fury.

The prairie is special because it is a place of change. We know we can't control the moods of Mother Nature, but we can recognize and react to those things – restoring and preserving CRP as an integral component of North Dakota's future – we can influence.



RING-NECKED PHEASANTS

Stan Kohn, Upland Game Management Biologist

Thanks to another fairly mild winter in 2003-2004, North Dakota pheasant hunters can look forward to an excellent fall hunting season.

Spring crowing counts showed good numbers of breeding birds throughout much of the pheasant range. Spring weather conditions were also conducive to good nesting success. Reproduction and survival of young birds was not known by early summer, but if it's average, birds will be found in good numbers in traditional areas.

Two programs – CRP and Private Land Open to Sportsmen – have benefited pheasants and hunters in North Dakota. The Conservation Reserve Program has provided good nesting cover on private land the last 15 years. The Game and Fish Department's PLOTS program is providing access to good hunting areas. The loss of either program would greatly decrease hunting opportunities.

Hunters enjoyed a great pheasant season last fall by bagging more than 592,000 roosters, the highest harvest in the state in more than 50 years. Total number of hunters in 2003 was close to 89,000. Good hunting success is related to mild winters the past five-plus years, and quality cover on private land as a result of CRP.

Look for excellent pheasant hunting this fall in south central and southeastern North Dakota. Pheasants will also be plentiful all along the Missouri River System and in many areas south of Interstate 94.

Craig Birnle



More pheasants were shot in North Dakota in 2003 than during any fall season in the last half-century.

29,000 in 2003. Nonresident hunter numbers also jumped about 600 last year. Both groups enjoyed some pretty good success, as grouse-per-hunter increased about 14 percent. Total sharptail harvest increased nearly 30 percent last year.

Sharptail production last summer was a little below average, but when combined with the excellent carry-over of adults, good numbers of birds were found over most of the state. Since production drives changes in breeding populations, some decreases were anticipated this spring on dancing grounds. And so it was. Department personnel gathered census data at 20 areas, totaling more than 700 square miles. Changes varied from a decrease of 29 percent to an increase of 23 percent. The largest decrease was in the northwest corner of the

state where winter was more severe than typical. The largest increase was in the southeast where winter was mild. While 13 of 20 areas had decreases this spring, the statewide decrease was only about 5 percent.

The influence habitat has on sharptail populations is typically long-term and felt more slowly, but it does occur. CRP has been a benefit to many wildlife species, including sharp-tailed grouse. However, there is a two- to four-year lag – as grasses grow and cover improves – between the establishment of CRP and its usefulness to prairie grouse. When first introduced, it was several years before CRP acres had a noticeable effect on prairie grouse populations. But as CRP acres increased across the North Dakota landscape over time, sharptails responded by pioneering into new territories and increasing in density where birds were already rooted.

SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

Gerald Kobriger, Upland Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson

The potential exists for another good sharp-tailed grouse season, but spring and early summer saw many weather extremes. Record low temperatures in mid-June, drought conditions in the southwest, excess rain in other areas are all detrimental to grouse production.

Weather can drastically affect grouse numbers and is generally the reason behind year-to-year population fluctuations. The reproductive months of mid-May to mid-July are the most critical. The right temperatures can promote good chick survival and growth. Favorable temperatures can also stimulate insect numbers, which are necessary food for chicks for about the first month of life. However, precipitation can also make or break reproduction. Wet weather, combined with low temperatures, can kill chicks and hurt their food supply.

Hunters in North Dakota seemed to take a little more interest in sharp-tailed grouse last fall. For the first time in a while, the number of resident sharptail hunters increased, rising from about 25,000 in 2002 to more than

HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE

Gerald Kobriger

The Pat is coming back – maybe. Hungarian partridge populations took a big jump last year as numbers of broods on census routes climbed 38 percent over 2002 and 60 percent over 2001. Wing samples sent in by hunters last year increased more than 50 percent. Note: The 684 wing samples were the highest since 1993.

The higher numbers were also reflected in last year's hunting season as total harvest jumped from 63,000 partridge to more than 90,000 birds. That's an increase of 43 percent. Birds per hunter climbed 17 percent from 2002 to 2003, and the number of hunters increased by 22 percent. Increases were seen in both resident and nonresident hunters.

The distribution of partridge harvested varied between resident and nonresident hunters. For resident hunters, the five top counties were all in the northwest quarter of the state, from Ward County, No. 1, to Burke County, No. 5. Nonresidents, however, seemed to take advantage of available partridge populations while concentrating on other game like waterfowl or pheasants. While Ward County was also tops among nonresident hunters, second was Bowman County in the southwest, followed by McIntosh County nearer the southeastern part of the state.

Rural mail carriers count partridge for the Department as they travel North Dakota back roads each spring. This spring, carriers traveled more than 57,000 miles in a three-day period. Their partridge count in April was up more than 12 percent from last year, which had been the highest count since 1993. The increase is a reflection of good production the last two years and continued mild winters over most of the state. Partridge numbers are still fairly low, but have increased by 116 percent since the low in 1998. Hopefully, moisture and habitat conditions will allow them to continue their recovery.



Wild turkey populations in North Dakota continue to rise, providing more opportunities for hunters.

But there is a concern. Of the adult birds shot during the last five early September seasons, 88 percent are adult females. North Dakota wing data, however, shows there may be a remedy to this, as the later the season, the lower the percentage of adult females bagged. Findings from sage grouse research in other states have indicated the same. So, beginning this year, North Dakota's sage grouse season will not open on the Monday following the sharp-tail opener, but will be delayed two weeks until September 27.

WILD TURKEYS

Stan Kohn

Hunters with a fall turkey license can expect another great season starting in October. Mild winter weather and good reproduction has

increased the state's turkey population to record levels.

Last fall was a record season:

- A record 8,048 wild turkey licenses were issued to North Dakota residents.
- A record 6,886 hunters participated, up from 5,234 in 2003.
- Hunters harvested a record 4,410 birds, up from the previous high of 3,607 in 1988, for a success of 64 percent.

Over the years, Department wildlife managers have adjusted turkey unit boundaries and added new units to increase hunting opportunities. Because of high wild turkey numbers, all of North Dakota was open to turkey hunting for the first time in 2003.

North Dakota's wild turkey population continues to increase, and the goal is to provide as many hunting opportunities as possible, while reducing depredation problems on private lands.

SAGE GROUSE

Gerald Kobriger

Five years ago, sage grouse were an obscure species occupying about 800 square miles of habitat in the southwestern corner of North Dakota. While there is a small, dedicated group of sage grouse hunters in the state, and an even smaller group of nonresident hunters, sage grouse were not even a blip on most people's radar screens. Other than a couple hundred hunters, and a similar number of landowners in the southwest, no one was really concerned about these birds.

How things can change.

Petitions have been filed with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list sage grouse as a threatened or endangered species. Every state with a sage grouse population has or is preparing a state sage grouse conservation management plan.

Since 1989, the number of sage grouse hunters has varied from a high of 192 to a low of 88, and has averaged about 124 hunters per year. During that time, sage grouse harvest has fluctuated between 83 and 14 birds, with the smallest harvest occurring last season. Only about 3 percent of the fall grouse population has been harvested during that span.



Greg Gallitsos

Fewer resident and nonresident waterfowl hunters pursued ducks and geese in North Dakota in 2003.

DUCKS AND GEESE

Mike Johnson, Game Management Section Leader

The 2004 breeding season was a strange one for ducks in North Dakota. Last fall and winter were dry across most of the state, and conditions remained that way as birds returned in spring. There were fewer of the smaller, important temporary and seasonal wetlands available to attract breeding pairs, but like 2003, water conditions improved.

The number of breeding ducks counted this spring in North Dakota was higher than 2003, which was double the average since 1948. Individual species numbers were up for all ducks except mallard and blue-winged teal, both indicating declines of less than 15 percent. Showing the most significant increases were redheads, 51 percent, gadwall, 44 percent, and wigeon, 39 percent.

By early June, dry conditions were replaced by above average precipitation across the northern and eastern portions of the state. Spring rains provided excellent conditions for the growing season, meaning good nesting cover for ducks, and rejuvenating some dry wetlands.

North Dakota still carries more than 3 million acres of CRP, which is important habitat

for ducks. CRP acres should remain about the same, at least for the short-term, but there are serious concerns about new CRP haying and grazing rules on nesting waterfowl and other upland nesting birds.

Resident Canada goose numbers in North Dakota remain high, and the plan is to continue the state's early September hunting season to further reduce this population. During last year's early season, 6,871 hunters bagged about 20,500 Canada geese.

The number of resident and nonresident waterfowl hunters in North Dakota was down 11 percent in 2003, to 56,837 hunters. The duck harvest in 2003 was down 44 percent – 307,000 ducks – and the goose harvest was down 5 percent – 210,000 geese. Based on hunter reports, hunters bagged 172,000 mallards and 146,000 Canada geese last year. Despite light geese staging in Canada longer in the fall, hunters in North Dakota in 2003 shot 61,000 birds, up about 10,000 from 2002, but still well below the average of the early 1990s.

WHITE-TAILED DEER

Bill Jensen, Big Game Management Biologist

This fall, 145,250 deer licenses are available to hunters in North Dakota. This is an increase of 21,775 licenses – the majority for antlerless deer – from the previous record high in 2003.

A host of factors play a role in the high deer numbers in northern and eastern North Dakota. However, recent outbreaks of epizootic hemorrhagic disease, or EHD, have kept numbers in check in several hunting units in southwestern North Dakota.

Sound wildlife management depends upon hunters as the best tool for managing deer populations. Harvesting antlerless deer is not just an opportunity to fill the freezer; it is truly the most essential component of deer management.

In a state with only about 4 percent of the surface area forested – the lowest such figure in the United States – escape cover for animals was historically limited. CRP has changed that and provided adult deer and their young additional hiding cover from predators and hunters. Between 1975 and 1985, North Dakota offered about 50,000 deer licenses on an annual basis. Since 1995, that number has jumped to more than 95,000 each year.

During severe winter conditions deer seek warmer thermal cover to escape bitter winds. In Great Lakes states, for instance, cedar swamps draw deer in from surrounding areas. Without specifically designed research it is difficult to quantify the importance of CRP as thermal cover for wintering deer. However, while conducting aerial surveys last winter on some very cold days, Department big game biologists frequently noted large numbers of deer bedded down on the leeward sides of hills in CRP fields. We can only imagine that when temperatures are minus 20 degrees and colder, finding a field of tall vegetation that stops ground drifting and breaks the wind is a modest, yet welcome comfort for a deer.

MULE DEER

Bruce Stillings, Big Game Biologist, Dickinson

North Dakota's mule deer population has continued to increase since the mid-1990s, and results from fall and spring surveys show that animals in the badlands continue to do well.

The 2003 fall survey indicated good production with 92 fawns per 100 does, and the buck-to-doe ratio remains healthy at 37 bucks per 100 does. The 2004 spring index in the badlands was just over eight deer per square mile, or 33 percent above the long-term average. In response to the growing population, hunters will have more mule deer hunting opportunities this fall. The number of gun licenses increased from 5,225 in 2003 to 6,375 for 2004.

Mule deer hunters had a successful 2003. Hunter success was 79 percent for antlered mule deer and 87 percent for antlerless mule deer. Hunters should expect similar opportunities in 2004.

PRONGHORN

Bruce Stillings

North Dakota's pronghorn population has continued to grow since the tough 1996-97 winter.

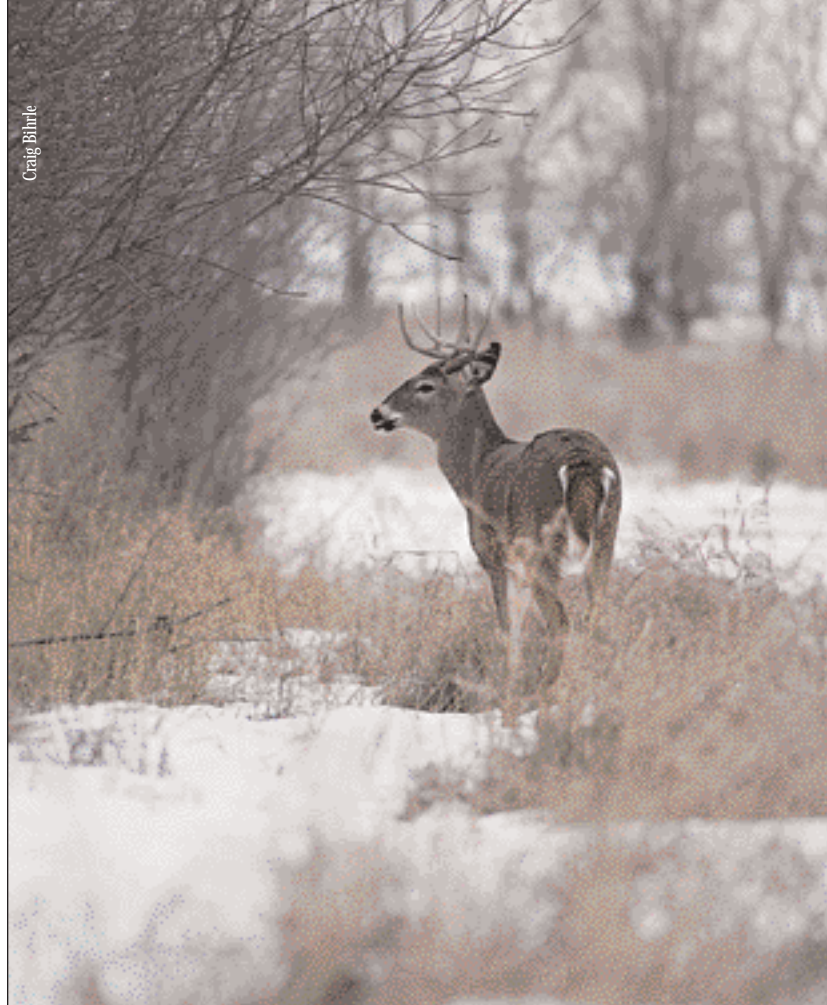
In early July, biologists conducted aerial surveys of nearly 17,000 square miles, or 90 percent of the primary range for pronghorns in the state, to determine abundance, distribution and demographics of North Dakota's population. The statewide population was estimated at about 12,000 animals, up 20 percent from 2003, with an age and sex ratio of 35 bucks per 100 does and 73 fawns per 100 does. The overall increase was in large part due to more pronghorn in the central and southern slope management regions (38 percent above 2003).

The increases in the slope management region are likely the result of relatively mild winter weather south of I-94, good spring

production and movement of animals into the area from drought stricken regions. The number of pronghorn in the northern badlands and western Bowman management regions was similar to 2003, while animals in the southern badlands showed a moderate increase.

In January, biologists radio-collared 60 adult pronghorn across the western part of the state as part of a study to increase understanding of pronghorn movements and population dynamics. Scientists observed some interesting movements of radio-collared animals this spring that may help explain why pronghorn numbers widely fluctuate in an area from year-to-year.

Of the 28 pronghorn collared in Bowman County in July, 11 were located in the slope management region in Hettinger, Grant, Morton, Stark and Slope counties, – and two are nearly 25 miles into Montana. The farthest documented movement by a radio-collared animal from January to June was a doe that traveled 115 miles as the crow flies. This pronghorn doe was captured just north of Rhame last winter and was south of New Salem in July.



For the fourth year in a row, more than 100,000 deer licenses were made available to hunters in North Dakota.

It's too early in the study for biologists to determine whether they are observing typical seasonal pronghorn movements or whether the movements are a response to weather conditions. The plan is to monitor movements of radio-collared animals for five years to get a clearer picture of their population dynamics in North Dakota.

The 2004 season will offer increased hunting opportunities with 880 more gun licenses available than in 2003. The majority of the increases will be in the slope management region. Hunters can expect similar success as in 2003 when hunter success was 81 percent. Archery hunting for pronghorn remains popular. Hunter success was 21 percent last year, as 1,075 archers took 228 animals.

BIGHORN SHEEP

Brett Wiedmann, Bighorn Sheep Biologist, Dickinson

North Dakota's bighorn sheep license holders should have good hunting opportunities in 2004. Due to low ram numbers within some herds, licenses issued in Unit B4 were trimmed from three to two this year. However, due to increasing numbers of mature rams in the southern population, one license was issued in Unit B1, an area that had been closed to bighorn sheep hunting since 1998. The holder of North Dakota's auction license will be allowed to hunt in both units.

In 2003, the Game and Fish Department issued four bighorn sheep licenses in Unit B4 and all hunters were successful. One license was auctioned by the Minnesota-Wisconsin Chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep for \$35,000, with all proceeds being used for the management of North Dakota's bighorns.

This year has the potential to be an excellent year for lamb recruitment, as numerous lambs were observed through mid-June. A more accurate lamb count was set for later in

summer. If many of this year's remaining lambs survive, it will be in addition to last year's recruitment of 26 lambs.

In January 2003, 26 bighorns were transplanted from Oregon to two sites in North Dakota – Kendley Plateau and Buckhorn Creek. The sheep released at Kendley Plateau, located south of I-94, have dispersed somewhat, with half remaining near the release site and half joining nearby herds. The sheep near Buckhorn Creek, located north of I-94, have remained near the release site and successfully reared three lambs during their first year in the badlands. Encouragingly, the Oregon sheep appear to be fairing even better in 2004, as seven ewes were still observed with lambs as of mid-June.

Bighorn sheep transplanted from North Dakota's northern herd to the southern population in the winters of 2001 and 2002 also continue to do well. Both herds successfully recruited lambs the last three years and both have high lamb numbers thus far in 2004.

Based on success of the 2003 transplant, Game and Fish is in the process of planning another transplant of bighorns from Oregon to North Dakota in December.

MOOSE

Roger Johnson

Big Game Supervisor, Devils Lake

The state's fall moose season, featuring 135 licenses, should be similar to 2003 when 127 license holders harvested 113 moose for a 90 percent success rate.

The best snow cover in five years made it possible to fly all moose survey areas this past winter. The survey indicated a slight decrease in moose numbers in the Turtle Mountains and an increase in the state's prairie areas. The higher count is reflected in more moose permits in units M8 and M10.

Recent expansion of moose into the northern prairie regions of North Dakota is largely



After years of being down, but not out, Hungarian partridge populations in North Dakota are seemingly on the rise.

undefined, but CRP has to be partially responsible. This program has provided both habitat and year-long food supplies for all of North Dakota's wildlife, including moose. CRP is especially critical on the prairie where winter habitat is most limited.

Since the inception of CRP, North Dakota's prairie moose counts have increased significantly. For instance, in the 1,200 square mile prairie survey block, zero moose were counted in 1980. But moose numbers steadily climbed from there – from 16 moose in 1987 to 66 in 1997 to 117 in 2004.

ELK

Roger Johnson

The 2004 elk season should be similar to 2003. The number of elk licenses fell from 236 in 2003 to 216 in 2004, with the decrease coming in Unit E1 in northeastern North Dakota. Elk numbers there have been reduced to a tolerable level for both landowners and hunters, so permits were reduced.

The 236 hunters in 2003 harvested 122 elk for a hunter success rate of 52 percent. This hunter success is similar to recent years, but down from historical rates.

SANDHILL CRANES

Stan Kohn

The Mid-Continent Sandhill Crane Population has been relatively stable since the early 1980s, but birds have extended their fall range over a large portion of the state. Because of this, the Department initiated an experimental sandhill crane season in 2001 east of U.S. Highway 281 (Zone 2), which included a lower bag limit and a reduced season length. The crane hunting season in Zone 2 was well received by hunters and will continue this fall as part of the regular crane season. Zone 2 will maintain its shortened 37-day season and a bag limit of two birds, while a 58-day season and a three-bird bag is available in Zone 1, or the remainder of the state.

It's too early to predict what to expect for a fall flight of sandhill cranes. Numbers will

likely be similar to last year. Cranes have been migrating into North Dakota later each fall, so season dates have been slowly adjusted to coincide with the migration. Department personnel will continue to monitor the harvest of large sandhill cranes, which are not as abundant as lesser sandhill cranes.

MOURNING DOVES

Stan Kohn

For those hunters wanting to begin the hunting season early, mourning doves provide an exciting challenge and wonderful table fare. Typically, mourning dove numbers are highest the first part of September when the season opens. However, doves migrate out of North Dakota early due to changes in weather and most are gone by late September. The key is to get out early and often.

Historically, North Dakota and Kansas often have the highest average spring dove counts in the United States. Yet, recent spring surveys have shown the breeding population of mourning doves has been declining nationwide. Good dove production in North Dakota during the summer has provided plenty of hunting the first few weeks of the season.

A special mourning dove banding project continued in the Central Flyway this summer. Silver leg bands were placed on doves captured throughout North Dakota in July and August. Hunters need to carefully check legs of all doves harvested this fall and report any silver bands found on birds. Band numbers can be reported directly to the Bird Banding Lab at 800-327-2263.

FURBEARERS

*Jacquie Ermer
Furbearer Biologist,
Riverdale*

Many trappers and predator hunters likely spent more time afield this past season. Overall, harvest of most furbearing species increased including coyote, raccoon, badger and skunk. Bobcat harvest was down slightly from the previous season even though prices for bobcat furs remain high.

Mange is still prevalent in North Dakota fox and coyote, but healthy animals have been seen statewide. According to observations and spring survey data, coyote populations are increasing in the Missouri Coteau and drift prairie regions, while decreasing in the Missouri Slope region. The Missouri Coteau area, mainly Williams and Divide counties, has likely seen the greatest increase in coyote numbers the last few years. Despite the prevalence of mange, coyotes continue to expand their range within the state.

While mange has greatly affected the fox population, fox have managed to remain stable the last few years. The Missouri Coteau and Red River Valley regions have actually experienced slight increases, although numbers are not like they were in the 1970s and 1980s. Increases in fox densities have been seen in the central portion of the state and in a few eastern counties.

Spring survey data also indicated muskrat populations are down, but remain highest in Bottineau, Ramsey and McLean counties. Skunk numbers remain fairly high in the

Harvest of coyote and most other furbearing species in North Dakota was up in 2003.

Missouri Slope and drift prairie regions, especially Dunn, McKenzie, Bottineau and Ransom counties. The beaver population remains stable, but numbers and damage are fairly high in Bottineau and Cass counties.

Many furbearers can adapt to changes in landscape and land-use. However, loss of wetlands and programs such as CRP can have an indirect influence on furbearers by decreasing the number of prey the landscape may produce or sustain, as well as reduce hiding cover for both predator and prey during critical times of the year.

With pelt prices remaining near the same as last year, and spring surveys indicating stable to increasing populations for most furbearers, Game and Fish personnel expect ample opportunities for hunters and trappers this season. The fur market outlook is encouraging. The last wild fur sale was successful, but import problems into China resulted in lower coyote prices. Demand for wild fur is actually up, so this is a great time to get out trapping and take a kid with you.

RANDY KREIL is the Game and Fish Department's wildlife division chief.

Craig White

